

MEMBER NEWS

Focus on a Federation Member: The Cooleemee Historical Association

By Lynn Rumley, Director, Cooleemee Historical Association

The Cooleemee Historical Association was founded in July 1989 to document and preserve the rich history of this cotton mill town. Though Cooleemee has never been a big town, it did once have a thriving cotton mill that employed nearly 1,800 people. Its nearly 3,000 residents were all *mill folk*—and among those one has to count not only mill hands and overseers, but also the town doctor, its newspaper publisher, the constable, teachers, and ball players.

After the association's founding, we spent our first two years gathering the legacy stories of the people who lived and worked here. We spent hundreds of hours interviewing and listening—with elders sharing their lives with us as they brought us precious photos and items from their cedar chests, outbuildings, and attics. Descended from sturdy, self-reliant pioneers who settled the Carolina Piedmont before the American Revolution, these elders shared stories of hard work, pride, and community. We quickly learned that Cooleemee's story was not just an economic story, but also a story of community and culture.

Thousands have visited our two museums, one of which is a mill house restored to look like it did in 1934. For those who grew up here and those who have made the trek here from scores of other mill hills in the South, our telling of the story—our interpretation of the facts—has rung true. That has been our aim.

At our height, our organization grew to over 1,200 members in a town that now has less than a thousand souls. For twenty years now, Cooleemians have come back home to our annual Textile Heritage Festivals each fall. With their support, we have produced a fine 448-page history book and 85 issues of our quarterly newsletter, whose pages are full of images and stories. We have, sometimes barely, been able to maintain our museums.

We believe in living history. The most important contribution CHA has made to Cooleemee has been to keep its spirit and traditions alive. We have now taught a full generation of local school children their roots. "Discovering Our Heritage" begins with the

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4-year-olds, whose history lesson begins forming an ever-expanding notion that they have a "past." From this they can draw life lessons, explore social issues, and determine their own futures. They learn that it is not just the rich and famous who make history; by fifth grade they know there wouldn't be a bank in Charlotte today without their ancestors' contributions.

When Burlington Industries purchased Erwin Mills in 1962, their first step here was to bulldoze its downtown square. The hurt ran deep. When CHA was born, it gave people a way to say "no" to losing anything else that faced the wrecking ball.

By necessity we have become historic preservationists. When there was a threat to clear-cut the beautiful wooded banks along our river—a commons where everyone gathered on Sunday afternoons for a century—CHA led a successful effort to create an 80-acre nature park. Today, CHA is working with local governments on a ten-year project to turn the old cotton mill into a new, vibrant town center and economic engine.

Some may think this has little to do with history; if so, they are short sighted. If our town dies, who will be here to tell our story a hundred years from now? If we do our job as the guardians of a proud yet humble history, the past and the future will remain intertwined.

To learn more about the Cooleemee Historical Association, please visit www.textileheritage.org or call (336) 284-6040.